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Worcester, Elwood

America and war

[Boston]

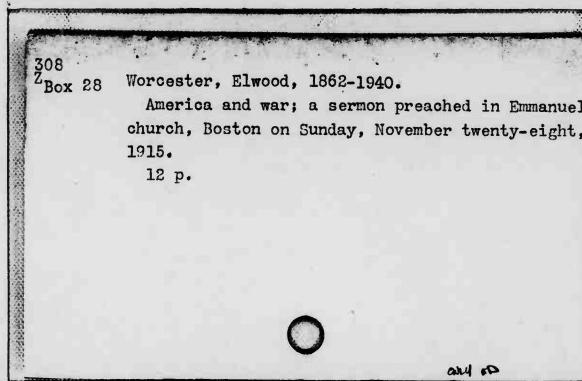
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America and War

A Sermon

preached in Emmanuel Church, Boston

on

Sunday, November Twenty-eighth

1915

... BY ...

ELWOOD WORCESTER

1916 Feb 1

Woe unto the world because of offences, for it must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.

MATT. 18:7

During my term at Harvard this autumn, I used to sit in Wadsworth House for several hours each morning, to confer with professors and students who wished to consult me. My most solemn experience during those days came through conversations with a young Armenian scholar who is preparing this year to take the degree of doctor of philosophy, the highest degree conferred by Harvard as the result of examination. He informed me that his father, in Armenia, had been the pastor of a congregation of 2500 communicants, and that in consequence of the Turks' deliberate intention to destroy his people, his father, with all the boys and men of his family and of the congregation, with innumerable others had been cruelly slain. He seemed more distressed for the fate of the women and girls which he dared not visualise, though to avoid it, he told me, many had committed suicide. The whole population of Armenia he asserted, was doomed to destruction, and henceforth the only remnants of this ancient Christian nation, which has endured so many persecutions, will be its members scattered abroad, mostly in America.

In the presence of such grief and horror consolation itself is dumb. There was only one service I could render him, to mingle my tears with his, and to advise him to go on with his work, useless and futile as it now appears, and to dissuade him from his intention of returning to his home to share the fate of his unhappy family.

I have not told you this story to distress you, but because it is a concrete example presented to me in the exercise of my ministry of the condition of the world in which we are living. What rendered this young man's despair complete was that this fearful crime committed under high Heaven, in the twentieth century of our Lord Jesus Christ, carried with it the ruin of his highest ideals. He deemed it to be the scornful and crushing denial of his faith in a good God who loves men and who watches over human life, and it had destroyed his illusion in regard to the beneficent influence and mission of America, which had been his second religion. On the day he informed me that our official note of inquiry and remonstrance was received, the Sultan, to show his utter contempt for us, caused fifty prominent Armenians to be hanged on lofty gallows in the streets of Constantinople. I do not assert this to be a fact, but so the Armenian affirmed.

This is not the first time in this war when our feelings have been harrowed, and we have been

obliged to look impotently on. As a rule, before one outrage has been explained to our satisfaction, a worse one has been perpetrated. It does not require a Doctor of Laws or a revelation from on high to tell us that such acts as the invasion and ruin of Belgium, the sinking of the Lusitania and of the Ancona, and the extirpation of the neutral Armenian people are not acts contemplated and sanctioned by the venerable body of buncombe known as international law (which I so designate because when it is wanted it does not exist) nor by the high authority of the Hague Tribunal, nor by the usages of civilization. Such acts are crimes against humanity itself. They are dreadful not only to their victims, but because they lower the value of human life, and deny all that the human race in its better moments strives to realize. What makes them possible is this: war is not civilization, it is the cessation and the destruction of civilization. All the qualities which are most detested and punished in times of peace are most valued and praised in times of war. Warring nations cannot be trusted to safeguard the rights of civilization, though they may be expected not to trample those rights underfoot. Yet, we must remember, they are fighting for their existence and with the hope that their national ideals will ultimately triumph. In times of war the protection of the weak and

innocent and the safeguarding of the common rights of humanity fall to neutral nations and if they fail, then, indeed, there is no helper.

Here, I confess I differ radically from our professional pacifists, or pacificists or whatever may be the best form of that unhappy word. In spirit and in heart I am one with them. I agree absolutely with their principal contention. I honor their loyalty to the spirit and genius of Christianity; but in regard to the means by which these hopes are to be realized I regard them for the most part as idealistic children.

From one point of view America has never appeared in a more favorable light and she has never played a worthier role than during the past seventeen months. Perhaps in history no similar example can be cited of willing sacrifice and unbounded generosity on the part of one people in behalf of other nations. In private initiative and conduct we have not fallen below our highest traditions of helpfulness. We have also been served by many noble and heroic ministers and agents whose brave efforts have prevented many wrongs and have mitigated much suffering. But in respect to our national policy, our pusillanimous acceptance of wrong whether dealt to ourselves, or to others, our watchful waiting, our impotent threats, our fine phrases, we have seldom appeared before the world in so humiliating a light, and the

reason for this is that we were totally unprepared and we were known to be unprepared to resist any aggression or to right any wrong. When the German submarines were swept from the northern seas by the English navy, the Central powers professed to accept our reading of international law only to violate it in the Mediterranean. So far as the ideals of the pacifists are concerned, the opinion that it matters not what befalls the rest of the world, provided only that America herself is not directly and publicly attacked, is too base an ideal to be put forward in the name of the Christian Religion. That was not Christ's disposition; He felt the wrongs of mankind as his own wrongs.

So far as our own future safety, honor and permanence are concerned the case is not different. At the present moment we are being attacked and the lives of our people are in jeopardy, and we may well look to the future. This war will end in one of two ways: either peace will be declared before one side or the other is beaten to its knees and thoroughly exhausted, or the war will go on until one of the combatants is definitely and permanently defeated. If the first event happens, Europe will repeat the melancholy history of the past forty-five years. The fearful passions already evoked will not die in a day. The terrible price of sacrifice already paid will not go for nothing if

the nations can help it. War will cease in order that it may be renewed under more favorable circumstances. Every effort will be made to win or force new alliances, in which effort we shall not be forgotten. A period of new armament and preparation will take place followed by new conflicts. These are not matters we can control, but it does not require much imagination to see what would happen to a rich and helpless America under such circumstances. We have already too much evidence of the interest taken abroad in our private affairs to entertain illusions on this subject.

But suppose the second possibility happens and that one group of nations emerges poor and famished but mighty and victorious, are we likely to fare much better? Are our rights and interests, our Monroe doctrine, our dependencies, our growing commerce likely to receive much consideration under such circumstances? Will such nations endure patiently the loss of all things while beholding us in possession of all things? The events of the past year do not make it probable. What kind of a Europe will emerge from this cataclysm no man can say, but in the light of what has already happened it is not wise for us to sit supremely still until we find out.

So far as I know, only one other great people in the world's history has deliberately organized

itself for peace and has renounced the possibility of self-defense. That nation is China. The plan in some respects worked admirably so long as China could interpose her great wall between herself and the rest of the world. It was not for nothing that that wall was built. It was not mere pride and conservatism, it was a profound instinct of self-preservation which led China to oppose so bitterly the entrance into her realm of the emissaries of Western civilization. As long as her complete isolation from the rest of the world could be maintained Chinamen stagnated, but China was safe, but so soon as her isolation was broken her martyrdom began. China lost her integrity, her independence, and her moral dignity, and became the football of the nations. We have grown to greatness under the same isolation, but ours, too, has vanished, and we must now be prepared either to defend our national ideals and our independence or to lose them.

With all this I do not believe there is the slightest danger of America becoming an aggressive or a military power. That is only a bugbear invented to frighten the simple-minded. We had great and powerful armies at the end of the Civil War and when they were no longer needed, in a few weeks they had melted into the rank and file of common life. We are too deeply infatuated with the ideals of peace ever to be led away

from those ideals. One would suppose from the way many people talk today that we have no history of our own, or a history so dishonorable that we do not like to mention it. The early history of New England was one long struggle against aggression. We gained our liberty as the result of seven years of heroic conflict in the Revolutionary War, and we have not yet learned to blush at the name of Washington. We gained the freedom of the seas in the War of 1812. Three years later, after provocation infinitely less than was offered in the sinking of the Lusitania, Decatur sailed to the Mediterranean and put an end to the tyranny of the Barbary pirates. The great Civil War, one of the most powerful struggles which any nation has ever endured, was fought for a moral conviction and to right a wrong; the war with Spain largely through a sentiment of chivalry, and it is a wrong to a people as brave, as chivalrous and as generous as ours to place them in the position we now hold before the civilized world. We covet no nation's wealth or territory; we do not wish to interfere in the domestic concerns of any other people, but we desire and intend to possess our own land free from foreign interference, and to entertain our ideals of brotherhood and the rights of man without being forced to lower our eyelids in the presence of atrocities. We should

be glad to see our ideals of freedom and democracy flourish, but we wish to impose them on no other nation, because we know that they can flourish only on the soil of free minds and free souls. We abhor war and oppression and we wish to end them. But we have learned to our satisfaction that this cannot be done by mere conferences and fair promises, but by making it dangerous to break the peace.

"Woe to the world," said Jesus Christ, "because of offences, for it must needs be that offences come, but woe to the man by whom the offence cometh." If to slaughter the innocent, to crush the weak, to murder women and children, to destroy wantonly whole peoples be an offence, then, if God lives, such offences will be punished. God does not pay His debts every Saturday night, but in the end He pays.

"To whom much is given of him will much be required." America is too great a nation to continue to live for herself alone. Her ideals belong to the human race. Two little nations, Greece and Judea were raised up in past times to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to live a life in the spirit more glorious than in the flesh. God seems to have raised up America for a similar destiny. Let us then neither fear nor falter, and when the verdict of one of the most critical periods of the world's history comes to be written let it not be recorded of

us that in the time of trial, while other weaker people jeopardized their lives unto the death in the high places of the field for their ideals, we were the only nation of the world afraid to sacrifice itself for its conviction of right.

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